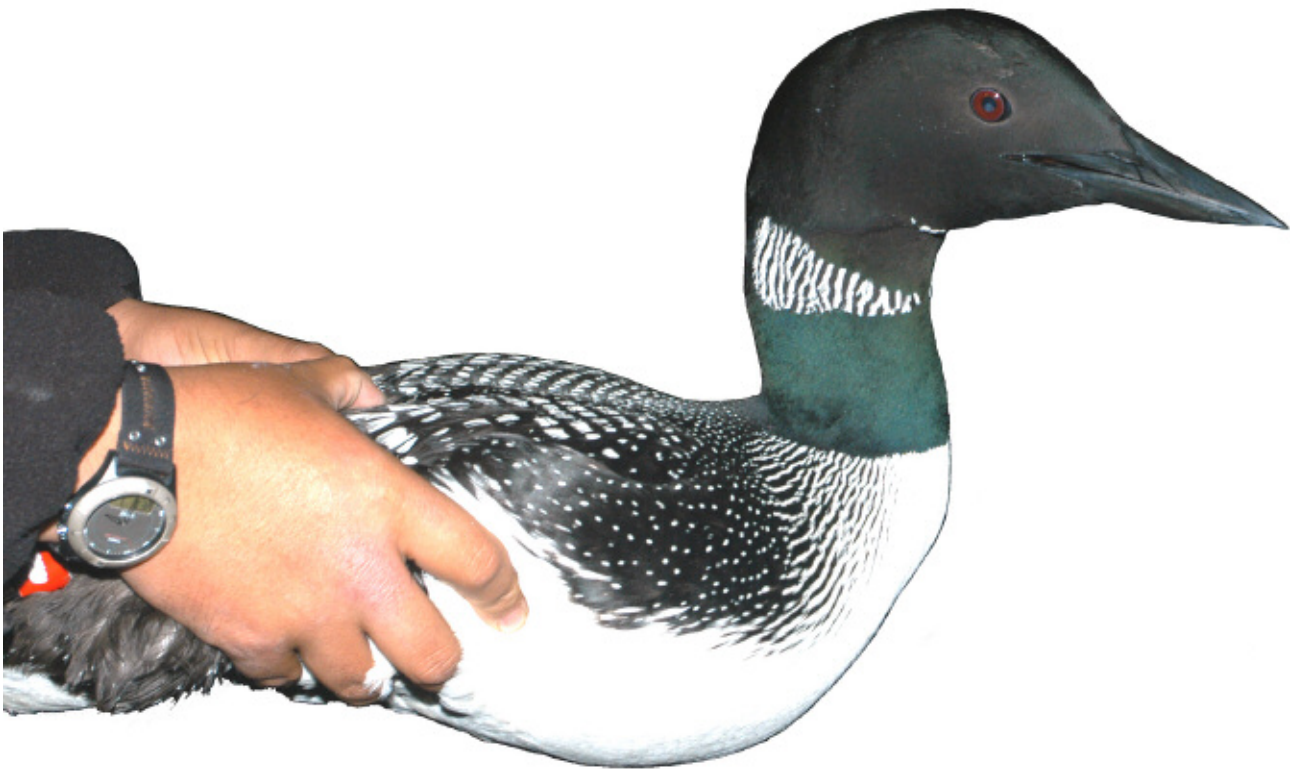




## Projects Supported by Nongame Checkoff Funds

Wildlife Division, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

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January 2005



***Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks***



## Introduction

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Greater Short-horned Lizard

The Nongame Wildlife Checkoff, implemented in 1983, provides an important source of funding for survey, research, monitoring, and conservation education efforts on those species that get little or no funding from hunting and fishing license fees. FWP receives no general tax revenues for nongame wildlife work.

Nongame Wildlife Checkoff contributions are usually matched several times by federal grants, work done by other state agencies and private nonprofit organizations, and the efforts of many citizen volunteers. Cooperation with many different partners stretches limited funding to cover many species over our large Montana landscapes.

This report summarizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) activities that were funded in 2003 and 2004 by the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff Fund.

Goals of the Nongame Portion of FWP's Wildlife Program are to:

1. Keep common species common. Inventory and monitoring of all species can help us detect population declines early, before they progress to the point where drastic action is needed. Detecting and reversing population declines while species are healthy is much more effective and cheaper than waiting until they are in trouble.
2. Reverse population declines for Species of Concern. This work focuses on species that are known to be rare or declining, or perceived to be rare or declining due to a lack of basic biological information.
3. Foster awareness and enhance public knowledge and enjoyment of all wildlife, through outreach, technical assistance, and citizen science.

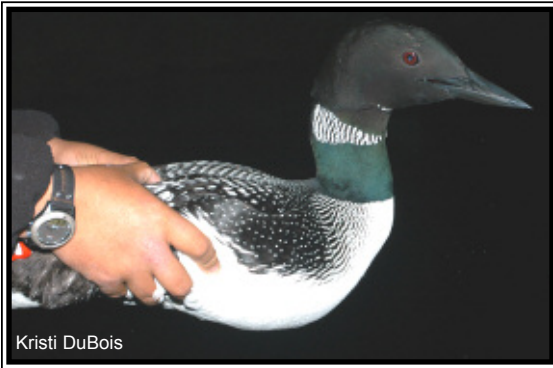
FWP would like to thank the many agencies, nonprofit organizations, and volunteers who have contributed to these projects, including:

[BioDiversity Research Institute](#)  
[Bureau of Land Management, Montana State Office](#)  
[Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes](#)  
[Montana Audubon](#)  
[Montana Loon Society](#)  
[Montana Natural Heritage Program](#)  
[Montana State University Department of Ecology](#)  
[Mountain Bluebird Trails, Inc.](#)  
[Plum Creek Timber Company](#)  
[The Nature Conservancy of Montana](#)  
[University of Idaho, Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Resources](#)  
[University of Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit](#)  
[USDA Forest Service](#)  
[ZooMontana](#)



## Common Loon Research and Conservation in Northwestern Montana

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Kristi DuBois

Common Loon with Color Leg Bands

The common loon is a [Species of Concern](#) in Montana due to small population size and sensitivity to activity during the nesting season. This cooperative project includes conservation measures designed to improve nesting success, monitoring of population trends and increasing awareness of loon nesting requirements among water-based recreationists and wildlife viewers. Partners include the [Montana Loon Society](#), [Plum Creek Timber Company](#), [U.S. Forest Service](#), the [BioDiversity Research Institute](#), and private landowners.

The project consists of two main components: the Montana Loon Ranger Program and a research project to look at the habitat requirements and population demographics of Montana's nesting loons.

The Loon Ranger Program is a cooperative educational effort funded by multiple partners. Four seasonal loon rangers cover lakes in the Clearwater, Thompson Chain of Lakes, Kalispell, and Kootenai areas. Loon rangers educate the recreating public about the needs of nesting loons, post temporary "quiet" zones around active loon nests, and work with public land managers, lake homeowners, and volunteers to monitor loon nesting success.

A 2-year research project coordinated by Montana State University was initiated to determine the habitat requirements and population characteristics for Montana's breeding common loons. The loon research project is expected to continue with a follow-up research project through the University of Montana to look at population demographics and survival of color-banded loons. The Nongame Wildlife Checkoff and other partners provide non-federal match for this project, which is funded through the [State Wildlife Grants](#) (SWG) program.

For more information about common loons check out the [Montana Loon Society](#), the [BioDiversity Research Institute](#) and the [Montana Field Guide](#).



## North American Amphibian Monitoring Program (NAAMP)

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Kristi DuBois

Boreal (Western) Chorus Frog

The Native Species Specialist stationed in Billings serves as the statewide coordinator for the [North American Amphibian Monitoring Program](#), a nation-wide annual survey conducted by volunteers. This program targets "vocal" amphibians such as frogs and toads. Annual roadside surveys for calling frogs and toads are conducted after sunset along selected routes in May, June, and July. This survey yields long-term trends on amphibian populations. This is a new program for Montana, and many areas of the state do not yet have routes established. Volunteers with good hearing are needed! To learn more about amphibian surveys or to volunteer, check out the NAAMP web site.



## Statewide Raptor Survey Routes

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Ferruginous Hawk

The Montana Raptor Survey Routes were initiated in 1978 to monitor long-term population trends for resident breeding raptor species. Forty-six driving routes are surveyed each year between May 15 and June 5. Many of these raptor survey routes are run by citizen volunteers who generously contribute their time to this long-term monitoring effort. An extensive data analysis is currently being done on 26 years of data collected to date. Results of this analysis will be posted on the FWP web page when completed.



## Cavity-nesting Bird Conservation and Education

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Western Bluebird

The goal of this project is to promote conservation of bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds by providing nest box plans, materials and building instructions to youth groups, interested landowners, and other members of the public. FWP entered into a cooperative agreement with [Mountain Bluebird Trails, Inc. \(MBT\)](#), a local chapter of the [North American Bluebird Society](#) to help achieve this goal.

In 2004, MBT members put up over 700 nest boxes with the help of Nongame Wildlife Checkoff contributions. Most bluebird houses were placed on private land, with landowner permission. MBT distributed nest box plans and bluebird nest box monitoring guides to each of the 55 county extension offices for interested landowners. They placed educational books and videos into the school libraries of 6 small towns in Montana. MBT members put on over 30 educational programs to schools and groups, and they also staffed educational booths at several county fairs and the Montana Stockgrowers Convention.

MBT maintains a list of speakers who are available to give educational programs on cavity-nesting birds. If you are interested in having them bring a program to your club or school, contact MBT through the [Mountain Bluebird Trails](#) web site. The [MBT](#) web site has nest box plans and instructions specific to Montana cavity-nesting birds.





## Activities of the Native Species Specialist in Billings

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Black-tailed Prairie Dog

The Native Species Specialist position in Billings is funded by the Nongame Wildlife Checkoff and federal matching funds. The Native Species Specialist is the primary FWP contact for survey, monitoring, and research activities on wildlife of the prairie, sagebrush steppe, and eastern Montana wetland and riparian habitats found in the eastern half of Montana. These habitats support some of the most diverse and unique wildlife species assemblages in Montana. Efforts center on [Species of Concern](#) such as the [black-tailed prairie dog](#), [white-tailed prairie dog](#), [bald eagle](#), [burrowing owl](#), [mountain plover](#), [long-billed curlew](#), [milk snake](#), [greater short-horned lizard](#), [northern leopard frog](#), and [great plains toad](#). The Native Species Specialist coordinates amphibian ([NAAMP](#)) surveys and chairs the Montana Reptile and Amphibian Working Group.

The Native Species Specialist chairs the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group (MPDWG), which leads the conservation efforts for both black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana. The MPDWG provides advice to resource managers and is composed of state and federal agency and Tribal representatives, non-governmental organizations and private citizens concerned with the conservation and management of prairie dogs in Montana. The MPDWG is a forum where these entities collaborate to achieve appropriate prairie dog conservation.

The MPDWG completed a [Conservation Plan](#) for prairie dogs in January 2002, and is working on the implementation of the objectives and strategies identified in this plan. Recent efforts include participation in the development of a Conservation Assessment for the white-tailed prairie dog, regional planning efforts in FWP Region 6, review and testimony for the establishment of [annual prairie dog shooting regulations](#), and work on the development of a statewide monitoring plan. A sub-committee of MPDWG is tasked with developing an incentive program for private landowners with prairie dogs.



## Species of Concern Survey, Monitoring, and Research

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Pygmy Rabbit

Each year FWP contributes funding toward survey and monitoring efforts being conducted on [Species of Concern](#) around the state. Basic surveys are done to fill gaps in our knowledge about distribution and habitat use of these species. Monitoring efforts focus more on detecting population trends. Research projects are designed to answer specific questions about species ecology.

Recent work has focused on prairie/sagebrush species such as the [pygmy rabbit](#). In 2004, FWP contributed funds towards a pygmy rabbit study being conducted by a student from the University of Idaho. The purpose of this study is to investigate the degree of connectivity between the Montana and Idaho pygmy rabbit populations, through dispersal studies and genetic sampling. This study was initiated in 2004 and will continue in 2005.



## Bald Eagle Monitoring and Conservation



Bald Eagle

Although the bald eagle is still listed as a threatened species, nesting populations in Montana have recovered to over 300 nesting pairs! The [US Fish and Wildlife Service](#) is in the process of delisting the bald eagle. Once delisted, it will remain on the [Species of Concern](#) list for Montana, and it will be fully protected under state and federal regulations. Recent nest monitoring efforts have focused on identifying and monitoring as many nests as possible. Once bald eagles are [delisted](#), a sampling scheme will be set up to monitor enough nests to identify any future setbacks in the population. The Native Species Specialist in Billings

coordinates nest surveys on the Yellowstone River and tributaries. The Native Species Coordinator in Missoula coordinates nest monitoring in the state. Bald eagle nests in Montana are monitored by an extensive cooperative effort involving many state and federal agencies, tribes, private industry, nonprofit organizations, and citizen volunteers. Guidelines for protecting bald eagle nests can be found in the [Montana Bald Eagle Management Plan](#).



## Northeastern Montana Wetland and Riparian Bird Surveys



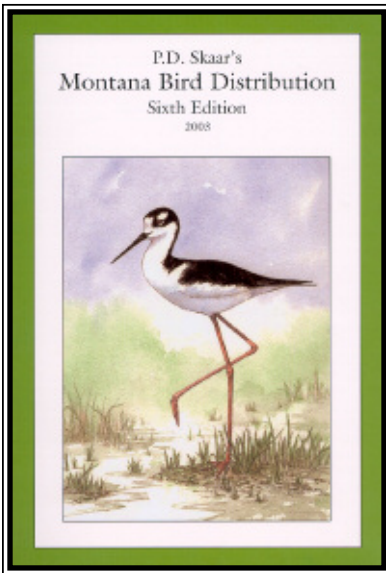
Forster's Terns

Nongame check-off funds provided a portion of the non-federal match for a SWG-funded songbird and waterbird study that was initiated in northeastern Montana during summer, 2004. Data on the occurrence, distribution, habitat associations and population status are lacking for the vast majority of nongame bird species that inhabit northeastern Montana - particularly waterbirds, marshbirds, shorebirds and prairie-riparian birds. Fifteen species of birds that depend on wetland and riparian habitats in northeastern Montana are listed as [Species of Concern](#), including the [black-crowned night-heron](#), [white-faced ibis](#), [black tern](#), [common tern](#), [Caspian tern](#), [Forster's tern](#), [Franklin's gull](#), [yellow-billed cuckoo](#), [yellow rail](#), and [Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow](#).

The first step in evaluating the status of little-known species and addressing their conservation needs is to document their occurrence, distribution, population trends and habitat associations. These particular species groups are not detected or monitored effectively by existing [Breeding Bird Survey](#) (BBS) routes and the current status of these species groups is unknown, incomplete or based on fragmentary data. Baseline data collected during the course of this project will fill a "gaping hole" in Montana's statewide bird database.



## Montana Bird Distribution Project



The [Montana Bird Distribution](#) (MBD) database and associated publications is a collaborative effort among [Montana Audubon](#), FWP, and the [Montana Natural Heritage Program](#) to maintain up-to-date information on the status and distribution of Montana's bird species. The first edition of MBD was published in 1975, and the MBD database was developed in 1991. The [Montana Natural Heritage Program](#) maintains the web page where people can enter bird observations or search the statewide database for bird information by geographic area. Nongame Wildlife Checkoff contributions help support the evaluation of bird records, data quality control, and data entry into the MBD database. About 39,000 new records were added to the database between the Fifth Edition of *Montana Bird Distribution*, published in 1996 and the Sixth Edition, which was published in summer, 2003. The database now contains over 90,000 records. Copies of the book are available (\$15 postage paid) from: [Montana Audubon](#), PO Box 595, Helena, MT 59624-0595, or by calling (406) 443-3949.



## Updating and Publishing the Montana Bird Species Checklist



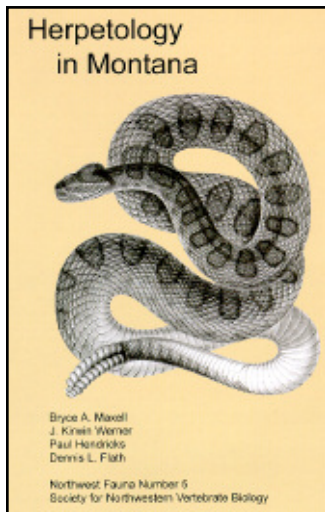
In 2004, FWP nongame staff updated the [Checklist of Montana Birds](#) in conjunction with the publication of the [Sixth Edition of Montana Bird Distribution](#). Both are based on information from the [Montana Bird Database](#). Nongame Wildlife Checkoff contributions were used to print 14,000 copies of the checklist for free distribution to the public. The checklist is also available as a downloadable [Adobe Acrobat file](#). For best results, print the Checklist on legal (8 1/2 x 14) paper. The checklist will be updated and reprinted as needed. To obtain a hard copy of the [Checklist of Montana Birds](#), contact FWP in Helena at (406) 444-4041. Bird, mammal, amphibian, and reptile species checklists are being developed for the more popular wildlife management areas and state parks. They will be posted on the FWP web page when completed.





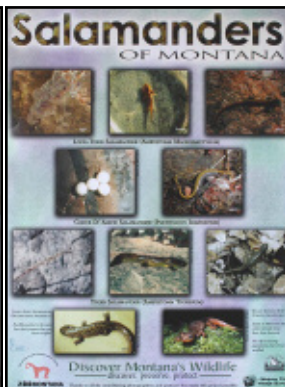
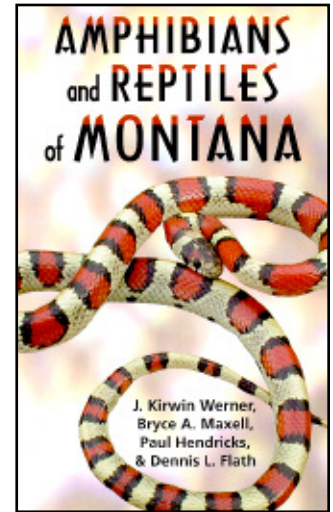
## Reptile and Amphibian Publications and Posters

The state's reptile and amphibian experts have donated many hours of personal time to compile information on the status, distribution, and identification of these important, but often overlooked species. Your Nongame Wildlife Checkoff contributions helped support the development of two benchmark books on the amphibians and reptiles of Montana.



*Herpetology in Montana*, published in 2003 by [The Society for Northwest Vertebrate Biology](#), was the first complete summary of all the known information about reptiles and amphibians in Montana, including the status, distribution, and an extensive bibliography on each species. It can be ordered directly from the [Society for Northwest Vertebrate Biology](#).

The *Amphibians and Reptiles of Montana*, completed in 2004, is the first complete field guide to all the species found in Montana. The identification of each species, including eggs and tadpoles, is illustrated through beautiful photographs and drawings. This book is available to order from [Mountain Press](#).



FWP partnered with [ZooMontana](#) to develop educational posters on the Salamanders of Montana, and the Frogs and Toads of Montana. A poster featuring the Snakes of Montana will be coming soon.

These free posters are available from most FWP regional offices and the Helena Headquarters (406) 444-4041, while supplies last.